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Author(s)	Wong, C; Meng, S
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Teaching Discourse and Orthography to Beginners of Chinese as A Foreign Language (CFL):

A Case Study at The University of Hong Kong

针对汉语二语学习者的语段和正字法教学：香港大学个案研究

Claudia Wong & Sue Meng

The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper reports a pilot study that was conducted in the summer of 2011 at The University of Hong Kong with the aim to examine the impact of teaching Chinese orthography and discourse on CFL beginners.

In the last decade, many research studies have revealed that the writing of Chinese characters would be beneficial to CFL learners (e.g. Packard, Chen, Li, Wu, Gaffney, Li et al., 2006; Shen, 2004; Shen and Ke, 2007; Tan, Spinks, Eden, Perfetti and Siok, 2005). Wong (2011)'s Socio-Educational Model for Chinese orthography learning shows that CFL learners' interests in Chinese may be positively impacted after learning Chinese orthography and discourse patterns, which will eventually influence their goal-setting process as well as their motivational strategies to learn Chinese orthography. Not only will the learning of Chinese orthography benefit CFL learners' reading and writing ability, but also their speaking and listening ability (Wong, 2011). In another words, the teaching of discourse together with Chinese orthography might facilitate CFL learning. Yet, this topic has received little attention in the field (Xing, 2006) and hence this study was designed to fill this gap.

Following the research project of The University of Hong Kong that spanned two years, this follow-up study spanned four weeks while two native Mandarin teachers taught the course Chinese as a Foreign Language I. It was an intensive course that ran for 5 days per week and 3 hours per day. There were two groups of participants: six Indo-European speakers and seven heritage Chinese learners who did not speak Mandarin as their first language (L1) and all were undergraduate students of study-abroad programs. During class observations, field notes were taken and lessons were audio-recorded. Each student was given an end-of-course questionnaire on the last day of class to collect information including their bio-data, their views on Chinese orthography and CFL learning, and their own self-evaluation of their learning progress. Their learning progress was evaluated by their performances in class, in quizzes and assignments.

The findings illustrate that the pedagogy adopted by different teachers directly impacted on the students' orthography learning motivation and eventually its learning outcome. Both the Indo-European learners and the heritage learners displayed problems in learning at character and sentential level and speaking with correct tones as the first teacher did not stress much on the prominence of Chinese writing in CFL learning. However, the heritage learners outperformed the Indo-European learners in the latter assessments when the second teacher took over the class, as she explicitly instructed the sub-morphemic information in Chinese characters and the benefits of

writing them in CFL learning. The discourse approach had some impact on the Indo-European learners while it did not greatly facilitate the learning of heritage learners. These suggest that the two groups of learners have different needs in CFL learning and the pedagogy adopted by the teachers as well as the Chinese social-milieu do have a direct impact on learners' outcomes. Further pedagogical implications will be discussed in this paper.